A Response to "Personalized vs. Parallel Eating"

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David Matson's paper clarifies an ongoing debate about first-century CE Jewish table fellowship: Was there a ban on Jews eating with Gentiles, or was table fellowship possible under certain circumstances? And, how can the answer to this question illumine Jesus' eating habits in the Gospel of Luke? Matson first reviews and assesses the literary evidence and argues that, yes, there was a Jewish ban on table fellowship with Gentiles, and this ban extended from Gentile food to Gentiles themselves. Second, Matson helpfully clarifies the scholarly debate about such a ban when he identifies a key distinction between "parallel eating" and "personalized eating." Parallel eating describes Jews and Gentiles reclining in the same space while eating different foods and engaging in no physical contact or interchange of utensils. Personalized eating describes Jews and Gentiles reclining in the same shared space while eating the same foods prepared the same way and passing the same service vessels from hand to hand and even mouth to mouth. Matson further argues that the Jewish ban on eating with Gentiles was not a dietary restriction, but a ban on sharing space, sharing vessels and eating with people who are unclean.

Third, Matson applies this new distinction in the understanding of Jewish table fellowship to Luke-Acts. Here, Matson shows that Luke presents the kingdom of God in terms of Jesus' radical, "personalized" table fellowship that crosses the established ritual and social boundaries of Jew and Gentile "parallel" table fellowship. For Luke, eating with everyone, including Gentiles, enacts God's borderless kingdom. "While more liberalized Jews might entertain the possibility of eating their own food *in the presence* of Gentiles, Luke goes well beyond this allowance to envision a table fellowship in which strict dietary laws for Jews are not in effect at all."[1] Matson also shows that in Acts, the disciples continue Jesus' "radically inclusive mission" by practicing indiscriminant, personalized table fellowship. By first establishing the backdrop of a Jewish ban on personalized table fellowship with Gentiles, Matson highlights by contrast the radical vision of salvation in Luke-Acts that Jesus and the disciples practice in their personalized table fellowship. Finally, Matson initiates a conversation between Luke's vision of a salvific personalized table fellowship and contemporary, postcolonial identity politics.

Matson's reading of Luke-Acts intensifies the social implications of God's kingdom. God's kingdom is where people eat and drink the same things at the same table with anyone without restrictions or distinctions. Matson's reading of Luke-Acts also has implications for how we understand "salvation." Rather than focusing on otherworldly benefits and eternal life, salvation is active in this world, in our daily habits with one another around a table. In other words, Luke's salvation disintegrates the social, political, economic and religious distinctions that create divisions and maintain hierarchies.

Paul shares Luke's vision of salvation as full, intimate, personalized fellowship practiced in the local and universal body of Christ. Paul's churches, to varying degrees of success, enact this salvation in the ideal and personalized table fellowship of eucharistic meals (1 Thess 2.8; Gal 2.11–16), in the working out of community finances (Phil 2; 4.10–18) and legal disputes (1 Cor 6.1–8), in the exercise of hospitality (Gal 4.12–16; 1 Thess

1. This quotation is drawn from a longer version of Matson's paper than appears in this issue of *Leaven*: David Matson, "Eating and Drinking Whatever They Provide" (paper presented at the 31st annual Christian Scholars' Conference, Malibu, California, June 16–28, 2011), italics mine.

1.9), in marriage (1 Cor 7.1–16), in worship (Phil 4), and in the ministry of fund raising, which Paul calls "the collection" (Gal 2.10; 1 Cor 16.1–4; Rom 15.26–7). For Paul, such practices in the Christian communities demonstrate God's salvation in the living (corporate) body of Christ.[2] This practice and the experience of God's salvation then redefines the community and gives them a new identity—"in Christ."

The conversation between Luke's vision of personalized table fellowship between Jews and Gentiles and Paul's commitment to realize this level of fellowship in the Christ communities provides another lens for reading both Luke-Acts and Paul's letters. Perhaps more intriguing for the broader, contemporary audience is Matson's query as to whether this first-century conversation can inform a postcolonial application of Luke's radical vision of salvation to identity politics. Such an application is quite compelling as churches in the United States are struggling to live out a radical, personalized table fellowship in a time when food, rightly or wrongly, is highly politicized, and postmodern identity markers often become fighting words. But when Matson turns to the postcolonial situation, he resumes a simple discussion of "food = identity" rather than carrying through Luke's point—that real personalized table fellowship means sharing space, sharing vessels and eating with people we have stereotyped as "unclean" (Gal 2; 1 Cor 11.21).

In what follows, I push Matson's argument a little further to ask, when food items and cooking practices equal ethnic identities for us, how can our churches still answer Jesus' invitation to "embody salvation" through personalized table fellowship rather than parallel table fellowship? Justo Gonzalez notes that identity politics and food run very deep, and the basic issue of sharing a church kitchen for food preparation is impossible in some churches because of the mundane and un-theological aroma of cooking garlic—some breathe in the perfume, others turn up their noses.[3] "Can Garlic lovers and Garlic haters share the same space?"[4] These are real questions. At my own Pasadena church, our well meaning English-speaking members serve tortillas alongside the *lutefisk* and wonder why the Spanish-speaking members do not come to a shared lunch. There are many reasons. Cultural aspects such as time of day, place in the church and invitation have bearing on whether people show up. But Matson's understanding of parallel versus personalized table fellowship is also instructive. Putting tortillas on the table with *lutefisk* is parallel fellowship. It is not the same as English-speaking members accepting an invitation from the Spanish-speaking members to be guests at a *quinceañera* celebration in their shared church. When one is willing to be a guest on someone else's terms, when one is willing to be served from the same bowl, whatever the food, and when one is willing to leave their comfort zone for a shared space, then eating together becomes personalized. Often in a mission church the original "hosts" never learn to be guests at a common table; it's awkward and uncomfortable. It doesn't feel right or smell right and the tablecloths are different. Yet, to my count, Jesus hosts only one supper in Luke's gospel, while he was a guest at many tables. Perhaps learning to be willing guests prepares us to be welcoming hosts. Today our churches must ask if we are willing to move out of our comfortable seat as host and take a seat as a guest in our own fellowship halls, neighborhoods and common places of prayer. Luke reminds us that Peter got up from a nap, left his house and went across town to be a guest at a stranger's house. He discovered that the Holy Spirit was already there, lunching with Cornelius. Yes, there is a need for people to celebrate publically and reclaim cultural heritage and identity. Knowing who we are, it may be easier to accept an invitation to be a guest on someone else's terms. This reciprocal, "personalized" fellowship frees us to experience God's kingdom here and now, and saves us from our restricted political, social and class boundaries.

Personalized fellowship may also save us from our religious prejudices. A few months ago I traveled to Turkey with seventeen college students from California Lutheran University. Our guide ordered set menus for lunch and dinner, making changes at the table for food allergies as well as political and religious commitments. This would seem to be parallel table fellowship with each student eating her own dish. But in Turkey, the "parallel" boundaries were different from what had governed us on a California campus. The Jews among us, usually restricted in the United States from eating pork dishes, now ate whatever was served because Turkish

2. I develop this argument more fully in my PhD dissertation "Koinōnia is Soteria; Fellowship is Salvation" (Emory University, 2006).

3. Justo Gonzalez, "Garlic Wars? Culture and Conflict in the 21st Century," *For the Healing of the Nations: The Book of Revelation in the Age of Cultural Conflict* (New York: Maryknoll, 1999), 1–21.

4. Ibid., 2.

restaurants do not generally serve pork.[5] The Christians, only restricted in their eating by food allergies, also ate whatever they wanted, except for me; I'm vegetarian. The two Muslim students, who share religious boundaries, usually eat vegetarian on campus, although for different reasons. Because American meat is generally not *halal* ("permitted" or "lawful"), but Turkish meat is, one Muslim student was looking forward to visiting McDonald's and having her first Big Mac. The other Muslim student, who is also religiously bound by *halal* foods, doesn't eat American meat because she is vegetarian. This meant, for seventeen days in Turkey, one Muslim student ate the same things everyone else did, and the other Muslim student shared the same vegetarian menu as her professor, an ordained Presbyterian pastor. In this postcolonial setting, our religious and cultural identities did not change. And our "parallel" eating habits—eating at the same table but still consuming different foods—did not dissolve, they were just rearranged. What changed our "parallel eating" to "personalized eating" was the three-times-a-day practice of sharing the same table, pouring drinking water from the same bottles, and passing the serving plates and bread baskets from one hand to the next.[6] We *did* exercise our personal, moral and religious food "laws" but we did not regard one another as unclean. Nor did we exclude one another from our practices of sharing fellowship. Perhaps there is a middle ground for personalized fellowship and identity politics.

Luke and Paul's vision that the practice of table fellowship enacts salvation offers another possible way forward for contemporary identity politics. It is not what we eat—although this is an important ethical question—but with whom we eat, and how we engage one another *as guest and host*. This is less about identity politics and more about stepping out of our own boundaries—the human boundaries that are not God's and do not manifest the kingdom. Matson poses the question this way: Is Luke is asking Gentiles to become Jews or Jews to become Gentiles? Or, is Luke asking both to become something else together?

Paul answers that God's kingdom is the "something else altogether," more different than anything we have practiced or imagined. Jesus prophetically demonstrated God's kingdom by stepping across human boundaries and calling disciples (us) to do the same. My work on Paul argues precisely (in agreement with Matson's reading of Luke-Acts) that personal, intimate community fellowship is salvation. Aristotle was right: changing our habits does change our mind, our character, our social identity. The more often we eat together, eat what others serve us and share what we have, without taking offense, the more we are shaped according to God's kingdom.

It is easy to be host—to take the position of control in offering hospitality—it is much harder to accept the invitation to be a guest. Will we venture outside of our own "home" to eat what we are served in another's home? Or invite someone in to eat with us?[7] And, reciprocally, will we invite whoever shows up at our community doorstep to eat a meal with us—not offended when they cannot eat all of what we eat? For example, would we go so far as to fast with neighbors one day during Ramadan or Yom Kippur?

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5. Turkey has been a secular democracy since the time of Ataturk's reforms in 1930–40s. There is not only a separation of church and state in Turkey, but a constitutional requirement that no religion be practiced in the government sphere. So, while restaurants serve *halal* meats (including no pork, which most Jews also avoid), women wearing hijab, or people praying, are not allowed in the government courts and universities. However, the practice of expelling Turks in religious garb from government buildings has recently been changing.

6. Not to mention sharing clothes, sunglasses, toothpaste, Skype time on the iPad, sunblock, flip-flops, and head scarves; lending and borrowing Turkish lira for the bathrooms, an ice cream, or postcards; and sharing hotel rooms, bus seats and swimming pools.

7. Paul's argument that if his eating meat disturbs the conscience of another, he will become vegetarian, is quite similar here (1 Cor 8.13). Are we willing to give up our "rights"—our rightful politics, our fought-for identities—to be a guest or a host?